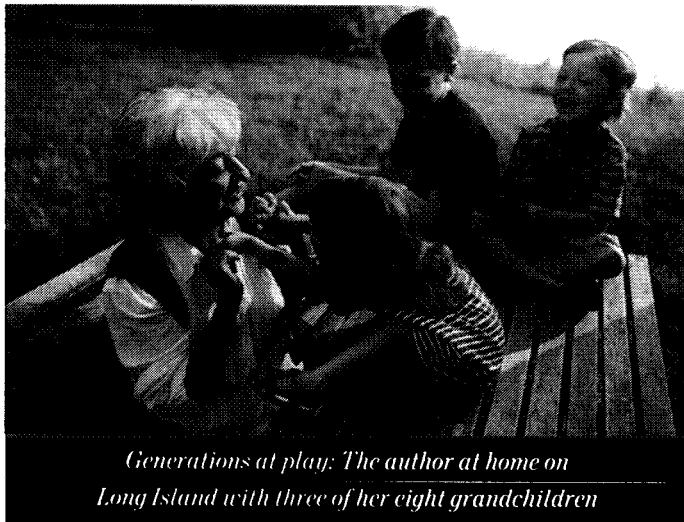


MY QUEST FOR THE Fountain of Age

The catalyst of the women's movement, now 72, hopes to do for the image of older people what she did to dispel the "feminine mystique"

BY BETTY FRIEDAN

At the start of my quest, I sat at my desk trying to make sense of some strange discrepancies between image and reality in the pile of clippings and studies I had been accumulating about age. On the one hand, despite continued reports of advances in our life expectancy, there was a curious absence—in effect, a blackout—of images of people over 65, especially women, doing, or even selling, anything at all in the mass media. On the other hand, there was an increasing obsession with the "problem" of age and how to avoid it personally, through diet, exercise, chemical formulas, plastic surgery, moisturizing creams, psychological defenses and outright denial—as early and as long as possible. And there seemed to be a growing impatience for some final solution to that problem—before the multiplying numbers of invisible, unproductive, dependent older people, unfortunately living beyond 65, placed an "intolerable burden" on their families and society with their senility, chronic illnesses, Medicare, Meals on Wheels and nursing homes.



Generations at play: The author at home on Long Island with three of her eight grandchildren

- Consider the following, a random selection from my pile:
- ▶ In a study of characters appearing in prime-time network television drama monitored for one week in a major city, of 464 role portrayals, only seven (or 1.5%) appeared to be over 64 years of age. Another study found that only 2 out of 100 television commercials contained older characters.
 - ▶ In an analysis of 265 articles on aging in a large Midwestern newspaper, none depicted older people still active in their communities. All dealt with the "problem" of age, like nursing homes, or had retirees reminiscing about the "good old days."
 - ▶ In a nationwide survey of American adults conducted for the

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National Council on Aging to determine popular images of aging, Louis Harris found the great majority of Americans agreed that "most people over 65" were not very "sexually active," not very "open-minded and adaptable," not very "useful members of their communities."

I went through all the major mass-market magazines for August 1986—fashion, general, women's, men's, news—studying every ad or illustration showing

identifiable faces. The non-existence of images that were not "young" was dismaying: the seeming disappearance of people who could be over 65, except for those extremely rich or famous—and they were shown as "young."

Even articles that dealt with people known to be in their 60s were, for the most part, illustrated with pictures of those same people in their youth. The main illustration in a *Vanity Fair* article on Imelda Marcos showed her at 45. A *Vogue* article on Jean Harris did not show her white-haired, as she was in prison, or in the dramatic years of her mid-life murder trial, but a brown-haired,

younger picture "taken six years before Hy's death." Four out of six illustrations for the article on Rock Hudson's death from AIDS were of the "young" Rock Hudson.

THE MYSTIQUE OF AGE

Staring at these images—and thinking about what they left out—I became aware that I had been on this road before. I remembered when some 30 years ago I had suddenly sensed there was something missing in the image of woman in the women's magazines I was then reading and writing for. That image defined a woman only in sexual relation to a man—as wife, mother, sex object, server of physical needs of husband, children, home. But I had heard women groping to articulate a "problem that had no name," because it didn't have to do with husband, children, home or even sex. And I became aware that the image of women we all accepted left out



woman as a person, defining herself by her own actions in society.

I asked myself, then, what it meant, this discrepancy between the reality of our being as women and the image by which we were trying to live our lives. I began to call that image the "Feminine Mystique" and to figure out how it had come about and what it was doing to us. I began to see the "woman problem," as it was called then, in new terms, and to see how that Feminine Mystique masked, even created, the real problems.

So now I asked why there was no image of age with which I could identify the person I am today. What did the image of the "plight" or "problem" of age leave out? What explained the absence of any image of older people leading active and productive lives? The image of age as inevitable decline and deterioration, I realized, was also a mystique of sorts, but one emanating not an aura of desirability but a miasma of dread. I asked myself how this dread of age fitted or distorted reality, making age so terrifying that we have to deny its very existence. And I wondered if that dread, and the denial it breeds, was actually helping to create the "problem" of age.

I could already see, from the panic that kept dogging my own search, that the Mystique of Age was much more deadly than the Feminine Mystique, more terrifying to confront, harder to break through. Even as age came closer and closer to me personally, I kept asking myself if denial isn't better, healthier. Did I really want to open this sinister Pandora's box? For there was truly nothing to look forward to—nothing to identify with, nothing I wanted to claim as "us"—in the image of age as decay and deterioration. Was the terrifying Mystique of Age—and the real "plight" of the elderly—somehow created by our obsession with and idealization of youth and the refusal even to look at the reality of age on its own terms?

All forms of denial of age, it seems to me, ultimately spring that dread trap we try to avoid. How long and how well can we really live by trying to pass as young, as all those articles and books seem to advise? By the fourth face-lift (or third?) we begin to look grotesque, no longer human. Obsessed with stopping age, passing as young, we do not seek new functions in the years of life now open to us beyond the sexual, child-rearing, power-seeking female and male roles of our youth.

Seeing age only as decline from youth, we make age itself the problem—and never face the real problems that keep us from evolving and leading continually useful, vital and productive lives.

THE FOUNTAIN OF AGE

Why have gerontologists not looked seriously at abilities and qualities that develop in the later years of life? Why are the political programs for age confined to those proliferating care services that work toward increased dependence and segregation of the elderly, as opposed to the integration of people over 65 into roles in society in which they can continue to function as independent persons and make their own choices?

Why the increased emphasis by professional age experts and the media on the nursing home as the locus of age when, in fact, more than 95% of those over 65 continue to live in the communi-

ty? Why the preoccupation with senility, Alzheimer's disease, when less than 5% of people over 65 will suffer it? Why the persistent image of the aged as "sick" and "helpless," as a burden on our hospitals and health-care system, when, in fact, people over 65 are less likely than those who are younger to suffer from the acute illnesses that require hospitalization? Why the persistent image of those over 65 as sexless when research shows people capable of sex until 90, if they are healthy and not shamed out of seeking or otherwise deprived of sex partners? Why don't most people know that current research shows some *positive* changes in certain mental abilities, as well as muscular, sexual and immune processes, that can compensate for age-related declines?

What are we doing to ourselves—and to our society—by denying age? (Peter Pan and Dorian Gray found it hell staying "forever young.") Is there some serious foreclosure of human fulfillment, forfeiture of values, in that definition of age as "problem"? In fact, the more we seek the perpetual fountain of youth and go on denying age, defining age itself as "problem," that "problem" will only get worse. For we will never know what we could be, and we will not organize in our maturity to break through the barriers that keep us from using our evolving gifts in society, or demand the structures we need to nourish them.

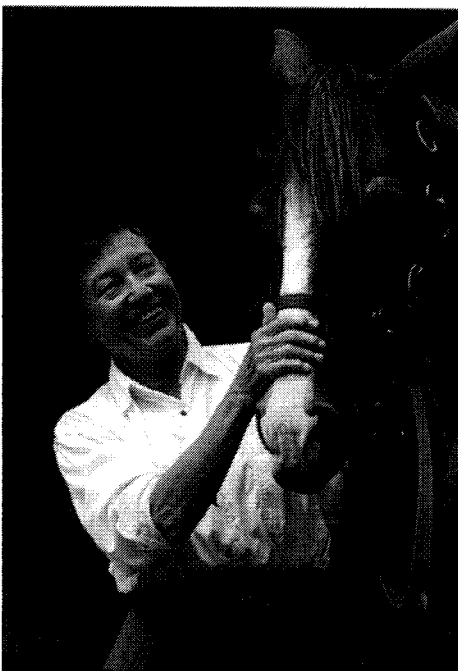
I think it is time we start searching for the Fountain of Age, time that we stop denying our growing older and look at the actuality of our experience and that of other women and men who have gone beyond denial to a new place in their 60s, 70s and 80s. It is time to look at age on its own terms and put names on its values and strengths, breaking through the definition of age solely as deterioration or decline from youth.

Only then will we see that the problem is not age itself, to be denied or warded off as long as possible; that the problem is not those increasing numbers of people living beyond 65, to be segregated from the useful, pleasurable activities of society so that the rest of us can keep our illusion of staying forever young. Nor is the basic political problem the burden on society of those forced into deterioration, second childhood, even senility. The problem is, first of

all, how to break through the cocoon of our illusory youth and risk a new stage in life, where there are no prescribed roles, no models, no guideposts, no rigid rules or visible rewards—how to step out into the true existential unknown of these years of life now open to us and to find our own terms for living them.

GENERATIVITY

In their "late style," artists and scientists tend to move beyond tumult and discord, distracting details and seemingly irreconcilable differences, and move on to unifying principles that give fresh meaning to what has gone before and presage the agenda for the next generation. Erik Erikson, finding a dearth of meaning in age in our time, conceptualized "generativity" as the promise beyond stagnation. The very lack of rigidly proscribed roles, or forced retirement from those rigidly separate sex roles of our youth and the parenting years, can make possible another kind of wholeness in the third age. But that often is achieved only painfully or find no expression because the age mystique denies us new pos-



Mary Jackson Craighill, 72

She directs a dance company for seniors at St. Mark's Episcopal Church that performs in hospitals and for the public in Washington and around the world

JOE C. TRAVER—GAMMA LIAISON FOR TIME

sibilities. At this point, it takes real strength and a compelling drive to generativity to break through that mystique and find ways to express such wholeness in society. Some people retreat in bitterness or find what meaning they can in the routines of daily survival and the trivial pursuits prescribed for "senior citizens." But others, in their work or love, express a generativity that, as much as any truly revolutionary artistic creation or scientific discovery, may preview for a future generation new values and directions.

Some examples of this generativity in action:

► Since its inception in 1967, the Senior Concert Orchestra of New York has played almost 90 free concerts to more than 100,000 citizens in high schools and colleges, as well as a free concert in Carnegie Hall attended by many who may never have been to a concert before. Begun by the Senior Musicians Association under the auspices of Local 802, American Federation of Musicians, the orchestra includes retirees of the New York Philharmonic, the Metropolitan Opera, and the NBC Symphony Orchestra under Toscanini; it seeks the funding it needs to do its work as "a viable symbol for benign aging and productivity."

► The Seasoned Citizens Theater Company plays at senior centers, nursing homes and hospitals. Helen Mayer, the founder-director, has to seek voluntary contributions, since senior centers and hospitals can't afford to pay more than \$150 for performances that cost \$500 to mount. The motto at the bottom of the company's letterhead says, "We do not stop playing because we grow old... We grow old because we stop playing."

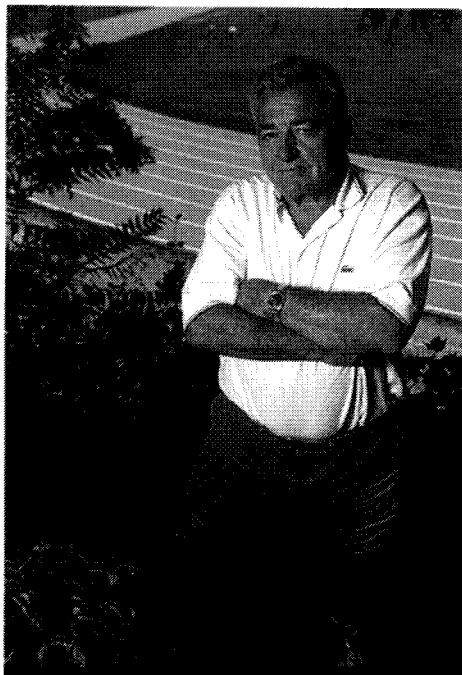
► At St. Mark's Episcopal Church on Capitol Hill, my old college friend Mary Jackson Craighill, in her early 70s, leads the Senior Dance Company, a group of dancers who have been working together for many years, in "religious dance alongside secular dance." They perform in Washington and Virginia public schools, hold workshops for teachers and students, and in recent years have held dance series, followed by conversations with the audience, at veterans' hospitals, soldiers' and airmen's homes, and many nursing and retirement homes.

► In New York, the Retired Faculty Community Linkage Project was conceived in the mid-1980s to match the expertise of retired Columbia University faculty members with the needs of institutions and organizations in the community. Linkage projects ranged from Nobel laureate physicist Isidor Rabi's lectures before New York City public school students to a community festival of photography, film and discussion, called "Creativity in the '80s," organized at Columbia for the surrounding Harlem community by a retired architect, composer and professor of religion. The concept, pioneered by the Brookdale Institute on Aging and Adult Human Development, is being adopted at other universities.

Generativity is expressed in more mundane terms whenever older people's talents are truly used as a community resource, or where they are allowed or encouraged to use their wisdom in work with younger people. In Fort Ord, California, "foster grandparents" went into Army homes where there were problems of child abuse, as the mainstay of the Army Community Service child-abuse program. They were valued by the Army agency because they went in as "respected, nonthreatening presences and

helped the mothers learn to care for their children without violence."

At 74, George Kreidler, a former linebacker for the Green Bay Packers who retired at 65 after 31 years supervising the construction of oil refineries and nuclear power plants for Bechtel Corp., was overseeing house construction for Habitat for Humanity. Retiring to Asheville, North Carolina, he was described as part of "a new breed of active, independent retirees, for whom a need to help society at large is as important as personal enrichment." Through the North Carolina Center for Creative Retirement, he also served as the mentor to a young college athlete, not to win more games but for his "academic performance and future direction." Others tutored grade and high school students. Asked his qualifications for tutoring grade school students, a retired locomotive engineer wrote, "I have my act together."



WILL MCINTIRE FOR TIME

George Kreidler, 74

A former Green Bay Packer and Bechtel supervisor, he works through a North Carolina retirement center at night court and social service agencies

THE PERSONAL IS AGAIN POLITICAL

In the early years of the women's movement, after we broke through the Feminine Mystique and began to take ourselves seriously, we recognized possibilities in ourselves that we hadn't dared put a name to until we heard about them from each other. The personal is political, we said, as we began moving to break through the barriers that had kept us isolated from society. We had no real role models then, because our mothers and the women who went before us hadn't faced the new road now open to us. We had to be role models for each other.

The same holds true now, I believe, for women and men facing this unprecedented and uncharted territory of age. We have to tell each other the way it really is, growing older, and help each other name the possibilities we hardly recognize or dare put a name to when we sense them in ourselves. I think we need new kinds of consciousness raising, to make that evolutionary leap into new age, to help each other move on uncharted paths.

How do we help each other finally affirm the integrity of full personhood at last—that radiant inner self that seems to carry the mystery and meaning of our

life—and break through the barriers that keep us from really using what we dimly recognize as our own unique late style? How do we find ways to use the wisdom we have derived from the painful, joyful experience of our lives as we have lived them in society, so that we may live out our generativity?

Part of the answer to these questions has to be uniquely personal; and yet it may be very hard to find, in isolation, against the total blankness of the uncharted age, that expectation only of decline, and the age ostracism—the graylash.

No one has seen the generativity of age for what I believe it is or could be: a stage of evolution in our own lives, one that could be key to the evolution and survival of our aging society. And since the personal is political, I think part of the answer has to be a political movement that will effect the changes necessary for society to use productively the wisdom and generativity of age.

Acceptance, however, must first come from ourselves. How do we create new roles for older people in society? That will take a lot of us saying no to the age mystique and demanding a continuation of our human birthright—to move in the new years of life as full

persons in society, using our unique human capabilities as they have evolved through years of work and love and our capacities for wisdom, helping society transcend decline and move in new life-affirming directions. That, in turn, given the way our society is, will require new social structures and political policies.

One thing is certain. We cannot even begin to help create the new patterns that are needed if we are barred in age from participating in the institutions that carry society forward. It is only now, as women are reaching critical mass in every field and institution, that we can even glimpse the possibilities of style and structure, policy and practice, that were hidden when the very rubrics were defined solely in terms of male experience. The "different voice" of women is only now beginning to be heard in new political and economic, psychological and theological terms, transforming the male model in medicine and law, university and business, and every church and academic discipline. And it is only now that the empowerment of women can be seen in its evolutionary significance—as solution, not just problem, in the crises of family and church, economy and government, threatening the very fabric of our society.

THE EMPOWERMENT OF AGE

For these same reasons, we must seek the empowerment of age, new roles for people over 60, 70, 80 that use their wisdom to help solve the problems of our aging society. But I do not think we can seek the empowerment of age on the same terms as the women's movement, or the black civil rights movement, or the labor movement. There is a danger in seeing age as a special-interest group, even though it has already become clear how much power it might mobilize.

I have been enormously impressed by the possibilities of the American Association of Retired Persons on the issues it does address, and its power to market to and inform that huge population of older Americans, to help bring about the paradigm shift necessary to break through the age mystique. But I am not sure that any model for age as a special-interest group comprises the needed political shift: a new movement that will use the wisdom and resources of older women and men, who by the year 2000 will be the dominant population group of our aging society, not so much for protection of their own Social Security and health care but to set new priorities and measures of success in business and the national budget, new integration of all members of all families to grow and to care for each other.

The movement that flows from the Fountain of Age cannot be a special-interest group. It would be a violation of our own wisdom and generativity to empower ourselves in age only for our own security and care. It would be a denial of the true power of age. Even now, many supposed retirement enclaves are evolving into subversive pools of new activism, combining play and learning with work, to face each other's and the whole community's needs for care. And companies on the cutting edge are meeting their own new problems by calling us back to work out of retirement or giving us new options that will use our abilities beyond retirement in tandem with the young.

The flexibility, autonomy and meaning that we now demand of work, the responsibility that we insist on sharing, are what in-

dustry and professions now urgently need for their own survival. Such flexibility and shared responsibility and shorter working hours are also urgently needed now by the new families—two paycheck or single parent or three generational.

A REAL CONTRIBUTION

This new conception of human age has to have some function in the survival of the whole community, stretching into the future. In evolutionary terms, the function of age must go beyond reproduction to contribute in some other way to the survival of our species. Our legacy has to be more than those memories of meaning we write down for our grandchildren. It is only by continuing to work on the various problems confronting our society

right now with whatever wisdom and generativity we have attained over our own lifetime that we leave a legacy to our grandchildren, helping enrich and shape that future, expressing and conserving the generativity of the whole human community.

And through our actions, we will create a new image of age—free and joyous, living with pain, saying what we really think and feel at last—knowing who we are, realizing that we know more than we ever knew we knew, not afraid of what anyone thinks of us anymore, moving with wonder into that unknown future we have helped shape for the generations coming after us. There will not have to be such dread and denial for them in living their age if we use our own age in new adventures, breaking the old rules and inhibitions, changing the patterns and possibilities of love and work, learning and play, worship and creation, discovery and political responsibility, and resolving the seeming irreconcilable conflicts between us.

I began this quest with my own denial and fear of age. It ends with acceptance, affirmation and celebration. Somewhere along the way, I recognized, with relief and excitement, my liberation from the power politics of the women's movement. I recognized my own compelling need to transcend the war between the sexes, the

no-win battles of women as a whole sex, oppressed victims, against men as a whole sex, the oppressors. I recognized that my need to reconcile feminism and families comes from my own generativity, my personal truth as mother to my children, and my commitment to the future through the women's movement.

The unexpectedness of this new quest has been my adventure into age. I realized that all the experiences I have had—as daughter, student, youthful radical, reporter, battler for women's rights, wife, mother, grandmother, teacher, leader, friend and lover, confronting real or phantom enemies and dangers, the terrors of divorce and my own denial of age, and even a kind of ostracism from some of the organizations I helped start—all of it, mistakes, triumphs, battles lost and won, and moments of despair and exaltation, are part of me now: I am myself at this age. It took me all these years to put the missing pieces together, to confront my own age in terms of integrity and generativity, moving into the unknown future with a comfort now, instead of being stuck in the past. I have never felt so free. ■



Helen Mayer, 70

As founder of the Seasoned Citizens Theater in New York City, she not only directs the plays but also passes the hat for voluntary gifts to cover deficits